

# THE REVIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT'S OFFICIAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

## REPORT

### Introduction

I was asked to review the programme and submit a report in April 2009 which could subsequently be made available to all interested parties. The terms of reference are attached at Appendix A. I began work in January. It is a matter for the Cabinet Office to judge when and how to make the report available to others.

2. The Cabinet Office helpfully suggested a list of people whom it would be sensible to consult during the review. The names of a few other people occurred to me. I am extremely grateful to all those who have talked to me or written to me or both. I met most people individually but I also had several meetings with groups. The latter were particularly useful as those present began to discuss the issues with each other and were not constrained by simply answering the questions I asked. A list of the people who have given me evidence orally or in writing is at Appendix B.

3. This review is not a history of official history but, for readers unfamiliar with the programme, it is worth saying that the programme began in 1908 and at that stage it was limited to "naval and military history". In 1966 the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, announced that the range of official history was to be extended to include selected periods or episodes of peacetime history. The current list of topics was settled in 2000. A list of some published histories, histories in the course of preparation and histories not yet underway is at Appendix C.

4. As well as the witnesses mentioned in paragraph 2, I have received unfailingly friendly and efficient help from Roger Smethurst, Tessa Stirling and, almost on a daily basis, from Sally Falk. Marie Donald has supported the

review on a full-time basis. Her knowledge of the Cabinet Office, her drive and her conviction that there is a solution to every problem have made my own task much, much easier.

### **The Big Question**

5. It might be as well to confess that I have not brought to this review complete impartiality. I knew relatively little about the programme of official histories but what little I knew inclined me to support the continuance of the programme. That inclination turned quickly into a strong conviction as I learned more about the programme. It seems to be greatly to our credit as a country, to politicians of succeeding generations and all parties and to public servants of all descriptions that we have had a sustained programme of histories written by distinguished, independent people free to reach their own judgments after full access to papers and people. I have come to see it as the gold standard of accountability to the country from those who have been privileged to hold senior office.

6. Given this bias, it is as well that the overwhelming weight of evidence supported the continuation of the programme. Out and out opposition came only from one or two civil servants who were unpersuaded that it is a proper use of public funds. Of the organisations inside and outside government that I consulted, only the National Archives were hesitant about expressing strong support for the programme. As our discussion went on it became apparent that their strongest doubts were to do with the continuation of the programme in precisely its present form. They also placed a great deal of weight, entirely understandably given their role, on getting as many papers as possible into the National Archives as soon as possible so that they could be freely consulted by scholars, however they were funded. In discussion, they acknowledged the case for official histories particularly where relevant papers were unlikely to be released for several decades. Many witnesses who unreservedly supported the continuation of the programme suggested ways in which the programme could be improved. In that respect the National Archives were in the mainstream of witnesses. **I recommend that the official history programme should continue.**

7. In view of the timescale for this review and my doubts about how straightforward it would be to apply to the UK learning from experience in other countries, I decided not to make a great effort to gather information about history programmes in other jurisdictions. Several people said to me that we had the best programme in the world, though I had no way of assessing whether or not that was true. Several countries seem to have programmes more akin to the work of the in-house historians in the FCO and MOD rather than to the programme I was asked to review. There is little doubt that the USA's effort is on a much more expensive scale than anything done in the UK. I was particularly grateful for the chance for a telephone conversation with Jock Phillips, the former Chief Historian of the New Zealand programme (the History Group in the Ministry for Culture and Heritage).

8. Most of my witnesses, within the Civil Service and the universities, were sufficiently familiar with the title of the programme to take it for granted and to accept it without question. But I was made to think whether it could be improved by the reaction of members of the public who knew nothing about the programme. It was reported to me – and I tested it and found it to be true – that the title is off-putting. The title suggests to some that the Government determines the content of the books, including any judgments expressed in them, and that it is therefore propaganda. This has never been true and is not true now. Thus for those less well-informed about how the programme works, the title fails to reflect its independence and quality. **I recommend that the title becomes “The Public History Programme”**. This is the best suggestion I heard during the review but, if a better name emerges, it should be adopted.

9. Although the support for the programme was in the region of 95-99% of those I consulted, it is clear that there are different views about the purpose of the programme. I received many suggestions that further work should be done on the purpose and that, once settled, it should be better understood. On the face of it these comments are surprising. Those responsible for the

programme have put into wide circulation a reasonably short and quite straightforward sentence articulating the purpose of the programme:

“The official history series is intended to provide authoritative histories in their own right; a reliable secondary source for historians until all the records are available in the National Archives; and a ‘fund of experience’ for future government use.”

I have speculated as to the sources of the prevailing confusion. It may be that the identification of three relatively distinct purposes in one sentence has not helped. It may also be that different people attach importance to different aspects of the rationale and are unhappy to find that others place the emphasis differently. It is certainly true that an examination of the histories that have been commissioned over the decades might lead one to think that there has not been a single set of criteria to be applied rigorously in pursuit of a clear purpose.

10. In one sense a programme that has developed over 100 years and, if my recommendation for its continuation is accepted, will continue to develop ought not to have too fixed a purpose. It might prove to be frustrating and confining. Nevertheless, I believe that it would be helpful for those concerned (see paragraphs 20-26) to spend some time thinking through a statement of the purposes of the programme which would be closely linked to the criteria to be employed in deciding what new histories should be commissioned. The conclusions should be made known to anyone with an interest. The exercise should be repeated every five to ten years or earlier if some flaw has been detected in the existing statement. **I recommend that a fresh statement of the purpose of the programme is developed, agreed and made known.**

11. My terms of reference do not require me explicitly to say anything about purpose and I see advantage in further work being done by others with an interest. But purpose is closely linked to the issue of continuance and it might be helpful for me to make some observations as a starting point for a fresh examination of the issue. As implied in paragraph 5, I should like to see

the concept of accountability worked into a statement of purpose. First and foremost the programme should be about making available to anyone with an interest as accurate and independent an account of significant events in the government of the country as can be managed. The aim should be a book that could be read with appreciation by a wider audience than other academic historians or the programme will fail to deliver the accountability that I believe should be at its heart.

12. It is perilous and potentially controversial to suggest how wide a readership might be judged satisfactory for academic history. The subject matter will influence this as well as how the material is presented. The best I can do is to hope that the majority of official history books might sell thousands of copies rather than hundreds but to accept that only an occasional particularly appealing subject will achieve sales of tens of thousands. It follows inevitably that it will be possible to learn lessons from histories written with the purpose of accountability in mind. Those with current responsibility in public life ought to be keenest to learn lessons but the lessons will be there to be learned and applied, whether by journalists, scholars or private individuals, provided that they are prepared to read and think. Thus I would see accountability as the first and chief purpose and lesson learning as a secondary purpose which is, happily, perfectly compatible with accountability.

13. It has long been accepted that one purpose of writing an official history is to provide a reliable secondary source for historians until all the primary sources are available to everyone. There is no reason to doubt the usefulness of official histories in this respect but there is a potential tension between this and what I have described as accountability. A duty to other historians is likely to lead to the inclusion of a great deal of material and perhaps to a fuller treatment that seems desirable to a more general readership. The smaller the readership the less effective is the programme as the ultimate vehicle of accountability. I accept that the secondary source purpose is important and should continue but it might be seen as subordinate to the issues discussed in the previous paragraph. To serve both purposes

without making the programme less effective as a form of accountability might require some fresh thinking about how the product of the work is made available. This could range from more than one book at one extreme through a use of appendices to the use of a web site or “print on demand” technology. I am hesitant to suggest just how the problem should be tackled because it takes me to the limits of my understanding of academic history and beyond but I should be surprised if it could not be tackled successfully. The point to be underlined in this report is that the purpose of providing a secondary source should never be allowed to override or undermine the provision of a readable, accurate and independent account for the purpose of accountability.

14. The history of public affairs is obviously not confined to this programme. Taxpayers’ money as well as charitable money funds the work of historians through a variety of routes. It is neither desirable nor practical for all history of recent events to be funded by this programme. There would probably be no complaint from historians or other funders if a much greater proportion of this category of history were funded by the programme. But resources are inevitably limited and the programme will always have to establish priorities. Apart from the overarching purpose some further criteria are needed to help decisions about priorities. These might include:

- the significance of the subject in our national life;
- the length of time before all the relevant papers are likely to be in the public domain;
- the usefulness of interviews with those involved in the events which would be facilitated and encouraged by including the subject in an official programme; and
- the involvement of more than one department or agency.

15. These criteria are self-explanatory and call for little by way of additional comment. I am not suggesting that all should be satisfied before a subject should be included or that they are applied on a pass/fail basis. Rather it should be a matter of looking at each of these criteria, and perhaps others as well, and reaching a view in the round. For example, a subject of some but

not overwhelming significance might make the programme if it is likely to be judged harmful to the national interest to open relevant papers in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, where the papers on a particular subject are soon to be open to all, that subject might only make the programme if it is widely accepted as very important and there is a serious risk otherwise of a book not being written until many of the participants whose evidence would supplement the official record have died. Subjects that are exclusively or primarily the interest of one department or agency are discussed in paragraph 47.

16. I was asked to consider whether the programme should continue to be run from the Cabinet Office or by, for example, the National Archives or Ministry of Justice. This subject generated an almost undue level of passion in favour of the status quo. No-one who spoke or wrote to me wanted to take it over. No-one wanted it to be moved from the Cabinet Office. There are several reasons why I was unsurprised:

- Ministerial responsibility for a programme which is inter-departmental in its nature rests most naturally with the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Office is best placed to advise him;
- the Cabinet Office's work in servicing Cabinet and its Committees means that it is almost bound to have an interest in any subject significant enough to warrant a history;
- other departments and agencies are used to leadership and co-ordination resting in the Cabinet Office and any other arrangement is unlikely to be as trouble-free;
- this is particularly true in the security and intelligence fields where some of the trickiest issues arise.

**I recommend that the programme continues to be run from the Cabinet Office.**

17. I was also asked whether responsibility for the work should be more widely dispersed amongst interested departments with a reduced burden on the lead organisation. Running the programme in its present form could not reasonably be described as a burden. If the recommendations of this report are implemented the administrative burden will be increased a little and it is conceivable that the programme could be expanded a little although I am not making a specific recommendation to that effect. There is no detectable pressure to disperse responsibility simply to reduce the burden on the lead organisation.

18. There is a strong and persuasive positive case to involve other departments and agencies more fully to encourage them to engage with the programme at each stage: deciding on new histories to be commissioned, taking a close interest while the work is being done, making good use of the history when it is available. With my own background in line departments, I am naturally reluctant to suggest that the financial burden of a programme on which a central department takes the lead should fall in part to other departments and agencies. On the other hand, that same background has taught me that there is nothing like paying for something to encourage an organisation to take it seriously. **I recommend that the costs of each history should be borne by each department and agency with an interest according to a pre-determined formula and any income from publication should be shared amongst departments and agencies according to the same formula.** Once it has been decided, in the final analysis by the Prime Minister, that a history is to be commissioned, a department or agency with an interest must be required to contribute even if that department or agency argued against the history being commissioned in the first place. This may not be felt fair but it is hard to see any other approach working satisfactorily. The small size of the sums of money at stake should be some consolation.

19. This report need not be dogmatic about the formula. Whitehall is not short of ingenuity in financial matters. Merely as an illustration of the sort of approach that would be sensible one could devise a unit of payment that would be known as a share. Departments and agencies could be allocated to



one of three bands accordingly to their overall budget. The biggest departments would pay three shares and others two or one according to their budget. To work out what each has to pay one would need to know:

- the number of departments and agencies with an interest and the band they are in and thus the total number of shares in respect of that history; and
- the budget for the year.

If the budget was £60,000, which is not unrealistic, and there was one top band department, three middle band departments and agencies and two lower band agencies (giving a total of 11 shares) each share would be £5,450. There would be one contribution of £16,350, three of £10,900 and two of £5,450. There is an element of rough justice but a formula a little more refined than equal shares avoids the worst effects of treating the largest and smallest identically and a formula that is not directly proportionate to each organisation's budget recognises the possibility that an organisation with a small budget might have a much greater involvement in the subject than a department with a very large budget. Even this brief paragraph may have made more of a meal of this than is justified given the sums of money involved.

### **Oversight**

20. In recent years each individual history has been set up with a project board which meets occasionally to engage with the historian in considering the range of issues that inevitably arise. With two exceptions the oversight of the programme as a whole is achieved by normal line management arrangements within the Cabinet Office. The first exception is that a Cabinet Committee of officials has considered subjects for newly commissioned histories after a trawl of departments. This Committee last met in 2000 as it has been the practice to add subjects to the programme at considerable intervals. A further round began some time ago but has been held up pending the outcome of this review.

21. The second unusual feature is the contribution of three Privy Counsellors who are consulted individually about the programme. This arrangement began in the 1960s when Harold Wilson's government extended the programme to peacetime subjects. For some years the three have been Lord Healey, Lord Howe and Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank. Their approval of a subject is taken as providing authority for the historian to have access to the records of all previous administrations.

22. These arrangements, which have been undisturbed for over 40 years, now seem distinctly inadequate for a programme of such significance. Almost all the effective influence over the programme generally is exercised by civil servants. The credibility of the programme would be significantly improved if there were input from a wider group. The use of the three Privy Counsellors to cover access to the papers of previous administrations is only satisfactory provided it is completely non-controversial but it is possible to imagine circumstances in which an Opposition did not want particular papers to be examined with a view to a history being written. In that case, the present method might not be robust enough to avoid trouble.

23. **I recommend that a Council is set up to provide oversight of the programme as a whole.** There are many detailed issues to settle and I would not want to be prescriptive about them but it might be helpful if I set out how I would see it working as a starting point for consideration. The tasks of the Council might be seen as:

- considering from time to time the purpose of the programme and the criteria to be used in choosing new subjects;
- checking that the programme is running as it should; and
- agreeing new subjects to be put to the Prime Minister for approval (discussed more fully in the next section of the report).

The Cabinet Office staff responsible for the programme would provide the secretariat for the Council. With adequate preparation, it need not meet more than once a year to monitor progress and consider any general issues.

24. The Council should be chaired by the Secretary to the Cabinet and might include three or four other permanent heads of departments or agencies, including one to represent the distinctive and important interests of the intelligence world. The three Privy Counsellors should be members of this group and thus be able to make a more broadly based contribution including initiating discussion of possible new topics. This change of approach might make it sensible to move on to a younger generation of former Ministers, as was hinted to me by at least one of the current three. It would be sensible for representatives of parties not in government to be nominated by the leaders of those parties.

25. Two or three senior historians should be members of the group. It would again strengthen credibility if they were nominated by the British Academy, not necessarily from amongst their own Fellows, though that is an obvious starting point in looking for people with suitable experience and standing (see paragraphs 32 to 34). For reasons that will become clearer in paragraph 36 the group might also include a literary agent. This would produce a group of ten to twelve people. It should not become much larger than that but there would be advantage in including a couple more who were not currently or formerly engaged in government or the writing and publishing of history but had a long-standing interest in public affairs and balanced and independent judgment.

26. The civil servants on such a Council will change from time to time in the natural course of events. I recommend that members of the Council not drawn from the Civil Service should be appointed for six years (after some initially shorter terms to avoid wholesale change every six years) in order that the Council develops adequate experience to help it to do a good job but is refreshed with new perspectives at regular intervals.

27. The project boards which provide oversight on individual subjects seem to me to be working well. They have been a valuable feature of the programme in recent years. It is important to continue to recruit to the project boards a representative group whose skills and experience will allow them to make a constructive contribution to the work. The boards should be involved in agreeing at an early stage the intended outputs (see paragraph 41). Exceptional circumstances might call for flexibility but in general the board's concern should then be to see that those outputs are delivered alongside checking that the work goes to time and to budget.

### **Picking subjects and authors**

28. It is easy to be critical of how subjects for new histories have been chosen in the past. The most important and constructive contributions have come from individuals with an interest in history and a vision for the contribution that the programme can make and who happen to have been in the right place at the right time. Unfortunately, many people who have been asked to engage with the programme have been busy with other tasks and have not seen the potential of the programme. Most civil servants who have come across the programme have been involved once in their careers and then very briefly. It is not difficult to suggest improvements.

29. The first step would be to consider adding subjects every two years rather than every eight to ten years. The outcome might be to add only one, two or three subjects at one time rather than several but members of the Council, who would be primarily concerned, would begin to develop some expertise in identifying the most important subjects. A topic rejected in one round because it was seen as untimely or because it came just behind another topic in terms of national significance, could be thought about again two years later. **I recommend that the Council have an extra meeting every other year for the sole purpose of considering possible new subjects.**

30. A possible procedure that might work effectively would be:

- suggestions for new subjects sought in writing from members of the Council, departments and agencies and historians;
- papers prepared by the secretariat after further consultation with the departments and agencies interested in each topic under consideration;
- a meeting of the Council to agree on the priorities for adding to the programme;
- the outcome to be put by the chairman of the Council first to the Prime Minister and, subject to his agreement, to the Leader of the Opposition to deal with the point about access to papers of previous administrations;
- an announcement to Parliament and more generally about the new histories to be commissioned.

Under this procedure, the three Privy Counsellors would no longer be providing authority for access to papers but would be helping to create a good quality forward programme by membership of the Council. It would be a matter for the Leader of the Opposition to decide whether to consult one or more former Prime Ministers from his or her party.

31. The process for choosing people to research and write the histories needs to be refreshed. The evidence is that suitable people have been appointed in the past but it is hard to demonstrate that the best possible people have been appointed even if they were. **I recommend that each time a historian is needed to write a Government history, the post is openly, if inexpensively, advertised and that the appointment is made by a panel which interviews a short list of candidates and includes at least two scholars of eminence nominated by the British Academy.**

### **Joint sponsorship**

32. I was invited to consider whether there is scope for some or all histories to be sponsored jointly with organisations outside government. My conclusion is that it would be difficult for government and for any external

body to form a joint and equal partnership that would be fair to both. In the case of a programme which depends on taxpayers' money and privileged access to papers it would be misleading for the government to create the impression that it was not taking final responsibility for the programme. It is also unattractive for an organisation outside government to seem to be accountable for a programme when responsibility for key decisions rests with the government.

33. Although joint sponsorship is impractical, it would be in the public interest if the government could develop a partnership in relation to the programme with an independent body of high standing in the world of academic history. I have canvassed opinion on the proposition that the British Academy be invited to form such a partnership. Some of the people I have consulted have expressed reservations. The most significant concerns have been to do with what has been seen by some as undue representation of a small number of UK universities and an inevitable bias towards older and well-established scholars in the Fellowship. Nonetheless, the British Academy seems to be far and away the most appropriate partner for the government in this field. I believe from their evidence and from a couple of exploratory conversations that they would be likely to be willing to help. I also believe that they would be sensitive to the reservations that have been expressed to me and that they would play their part with an eye to the interests of academic history as a whole and not just to their own Fellows. **I recommend that the British Academy be invited to play a key role in running the programme both to enhance its credibility and to use their expertise to make it still more effective.**

34. If this recommendation were accepted both the Cabinet Office and the British Academy would want to enter into detailed discussions to sort out exactly what each might reasonably expect of the other. As I have made clear earlier in the report I expect that the British Academy would nominate historians to fill the agreed number of positions on the Council. I expect that they would also:

- canvas the academic world more widely, every two years, for new ideas for subjects; and
- play a leading role in shortlisting and interviewing people interested in writing about particular subjects.

I hope that the British Academy would organise or facilitate seminars on individual subjects either or both to seek input as the work goes on and to raise the profile of a study in the academic world once it has been completed. The British Academy might also be willing to help in organising and promoting seminars relevant to serving civil servants (see paragraph 44), and to a wider public.

### **Cost**

35. I have been asked to say if the programme could be run more cheaply, at no cost or profitably. I have heard it suggested that it might be possible to trim costs, for example, by allowing less time for the research to be done and the book to be written. I am not optimistic that significant savings can be made and I expect that additional cost will be incurred if the recommendations in this report are implemented.

36. I am more optimistic about the prospects for increasing the income, though that issue will be explored in greater depth in a separate report to be produced shortly by Bill Hamilton who has been asked to explore various aspects of the programme from his perspective as a literary agent. It will make a significant difference if:

- conscious account is taken of the likely level of public interest in choosing subjects;
- books are written with an eye to a wider readership than other scholars;
- arrangements for the publication of each book are negotiated individually;

- a literary agent is engaged on the usual terms to advise on the programme and, where appropriate, to undertake negotiations with publishers.

In some respects these suggestions are a less authoritative anticipation of the ground that Bill Hamilton will cover and I therefore stop short of making specific recommendations on most of them. **I do recommend that a literary agent is engaged to give advice and to negotiate with publishers.** In order to avoid a conflict of interest this ought not to be the person asked to be on the Council if my recommendation there is accepted.

37. Although I am optimistic that income can be improved, it must be recognised that some subjects will achieve a bigger sale than others and that a subject should not be excluded from the programme, despite its intrinsic significance, simply because fewer people are likely to want to read the book. The likely sales of the forthcoming books about the Security Service and SIS, which are not part of this programme, should not mislead us into thinking that histories on subjects with less wide appeal can be profitable however well they are written.

### **Adding value**

38. I was asked to consider in various specific ways what more could be done to increase the value of the programme. Inevitably a history programme could never be expected to have wide popular appeal with hundreds of thousands of people engaging directly with the product. But, as I have argued earlier in the report, there could be a wider readership for most of the books written under the aegis of the programme without sacrificing academic standards or abandoning the aim of serving the academic community. If a book had several thousand readers and was reviewed in influential publications, its content would gradually shape the perception of its subject, even amongst those who had not read it.

39. The programme does not seem to be as well known as it ought to be in the academic world in view of the quality of the historians and the intrinsic



interest of the subjects. It is well-regarded amongst those who know about it but there is an opportunity to raise the profile of the programme considerably amongst scholars in order for the impact to be increased. I have already proposed that the British Academy might be persuaded to organise or facilitate seminars. The programme's profile would also be raised if opportunities to work in it were widely advertised.

40. Hitherto those recruited to work in the programme have been encouraged to concentrate exclusively on producing a book and have been positively discouraged from writing articles for academic journals or delivering papers at academic conferences. The policy has reflected the additional effort that would have been needed to obtain clearances and the likely delay in the eventual publication of the book itself. This has been understandable but the programme may have paid too high a price. **I recommend that historians are encouraged to raise the profile of their work and thus the programme more generally by publishing articles and delivering conference papers during the course of researching and writing the book or after it has been completed, whichever is best in the circumstances.** I believe that the extra work will be more than repaid by the enhanced credibility the programme will achieve in the academic world in the UK and internationally.

41. **I recommend that at the beginning of each project the historians and the relevant officials give some careful thought to the eventual outputs.** Despite advances in technology, in the present climate that is still likely to include first and foremost a conventional book. As trailed in paragraph 13, there could be several other products tailored to take account of the likely product of the work and the likely readers and how they might expect to access what they want. For example, I have been told of a project in New Zealand where it was decided to put the original, lengthy and detailed book on the web and to publish a book of just under 200 pages with a reference to where the fuller version could be accessed by those who wished to do so. Once the programme has caught up with modern developments in publishing, it will be important to keep on changing as the technology

changes. The impetus for the review came primarily from other sources but the changes in the world of publishing, current and anticipated in the near future, would alone have justified a review at this stage. In thinking about the nature of the output, a historian asked to begin work five years ago was in a very similar position to a historian who began work 95 years ago. Everything I have heard in the course of this review suggests that a historian commissioned in five years' time would be in a very different position whether this report had been written or not and irrespective of what is done about its recommendations. The status quo is not an option.

42. In the course of the review I have been struck by the way policy makers so badly miss the opportunity represented by the books and by the historians whose expertise is greater than can be gleaned by reading the books they have written. **I recommend that much more effort is made to take advantage of the programme to help current senior civil servants in their work.** First, they should be encouraged to read the books. Only by doing that will they be prompted to spot the connections, learn the lessons and pursue constructive trains of thought relevant to their present responsibilities. In practice, the lessons cannot be distilled and presented in a few short paragraphs. It would be desirable to produce and circulate widely at the time of publication a 15 or 20 page abstract of each book drawing on the introductory and concluding passages of the book but intended to whet the appetite of people working in related fields. The abstract might be produced in collaboration between the historian and someone familiar with the current preoccupations of the relevant departments and agencies.

43. Second, technology ought to be exploited to allow everyone including, of course, civil servants to search for material of current interest to them in all the published histories. This will no doubt become easier and easier but it can be done reasonably straightforwardly and cheaply using existing methods.

44. Third, there are several ways that more use could be made of the expertise of historians in person:

- occasionally they have led seminars on their work for civil servants but there have been too few such seminars in the past and more should be organised in future;
- it should become a standard procedure to ask a historian for information and comment when their expertise is relevant but I have been told of missed opportunities in this respect;
- case studies should be used on National School of Government courses (thinking hard about the past has long been an important part of the training for members of the armed forces but it is less common for civil servants);
- short presentations could be made at residential gatherings of the most senior civil servants which would be worthwhile in their own right but also remind people of the benefit to be gained by reading the books.

### **Miscellaneous**

45. I was asked to consider the impact, if any, of the programme on FOI requests. No-one has given me evidence about this but I have picked up a few anxieties, casually expressed, that a published book with footnotes related to closed material will lead to unwelcome and burdensome requests for access to papers which will have to be refused and, in some cases, may take up weeks of time without satisfying anyone. I sympathise with this though, if it had happened with any frequency, I expect that the examples would have been given to me. In any event, it is a potential problem to which there is no obvious solution. Histories should be published. They should contain footnotes. The freedom to make an FOI application cannot be removed.

46. I was also asked to consider the impact, if any, on the programme of a change in the 30 year rule. This report is being written before the Government had made a detailed public response to the Dacre report. If the Dacre recommendations are accepted and implemented there will be an impact but it will be relatively marginal and it will not be

noticeable for several years. A significant number of the subjects for histories have been in areas where papers remain closed for more than 30 years. The Dacre report suggests no change in that respect. Because the normal time for the release of papers will be 15 years under Dacre, it may be that fewer histories will be commissioned in years to come. The argument that a history could best be written while participants in the events are available to talk to the historian will be weakened. The significance of the subject will need to be that much greater to justify commissioning a history. On the other hand, contemporary historians will be able to write about a wide range of more recent events outside the programme but with full access to the relevant papers. A government announcement will need to be followed by legislation and implementation so 15 years will not be reached until the mid to late 2020s at the earliest.

47. I was asked to consider finally how to establish closer and more effective links between the programme and individual departmental histories. In New Zealand I understand that a Cabinet Minute prevents individual departments from commissioning histories on their own. To ensure that the highest professional standards are achieved, a department may ask for a history and pay for it including the administrative costs of the specialist group within the New Zealand system but that group must take charge of it. In this country that might be seen as going too far and I would not recommend it. But there is a great deal to be said for offering that option to departments who may see considerable advantage in taking it up. **I recommend that a department or agency wishing to commission a history of itself or of a subject in which it has an almost exclusive interest should be able to “contract out” the work on the history to the Cabinet Office programme.** This would avoid an organisation having to re-invent well-known wheels in some number by capitalising on the great experience available in the Cabinet Office team. The associated costs should be reduced, the standards would be guaranteed and the process of clearing the text would be managed by people familiar with all the problems that can arise. In such a case the

whole cost, including the Cabinet Office's costs, would fall to be reimbursed by the department or agency that had taken the initiative.

48. **I recommend that the programme should also extend to include histories on subjects that are considered worthwhile by historians willing and able to meet the programme's expectations although the funding comes from other sources such as a research council or a charitable trust.** I have no way of knowing whether this will happen regularly, happen only occasionally or never happen but it must be right in principle to allow for it. If the process of deciding on new subjects involves more people, leading to more and better ideas and the profile of the programme is raised in the academic world, it seems quite possible that in deciding priorities some worthwhile subjects will have to be left out. It would not be surprising if those subjects from time to time caught the attention of historians who wanted to pick them up and might be able to access adequate funding outside the programme. There would be some administrative costs involved in treating the project as if it were within the programme for the purpose of security clearance, access to the papers and clearance of the draft but they will be relatively marginal compared with the costs of a history fully within the normal programme.

49. It has been suggested to me late in the review that a charitable trust with a fundraiser might be set up specifically to fund projects in this field. I have not had an opportunity to test opinion more widely and I make no comment on its merits. I record the suggestion here to make sure that it is not forgotten and in case, in the brave new world I envisage, it strikes some of those concerned as worth pursuing.

### **Conclusion**

50. The starting point for this review is that we have had for 100 years a history programme of high professional quality and complete integrity of which the whole country can be proud. With the help of all those who have given evidence, the report has gone on to suggest how the programme might be better, stronger and more useful. Whatever is

done with the specific recommendations there must be change. The programme must not then settle back into an established and predictable pattern. The world in which it is set will continue to change and probably at an accelerating pace. If the programme can adjust to the prevailing rate of change, its values and the quality of the people associated with it give me confidence that it will flourish and continue to serve the national interest in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as it did for almost the whole of the last century.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

51. (i) The official history programme should continue (paragraph 6).
- (ii) The title should become “The Public History Programme” (paragraph 8).
- (iii) A fresh statement of the purpose of the programme should be developed, agreed and made known (paragraph 10).
- (iv) The programme should continue to be run from the Cabinet Office (paragraph 16).
- (v) The costs of each history should be borne by each department and agency with an interest according to a pre-determined formula and any income from publication should be shared amongst departments and agencies according to the same formula (paragraph 18).
- (vi) A Council should be set up to provide oversight of the programme as a whole (paragraph 23).
- (vii) The Council should have an extra meeting every other year for the sole purpose of considering possible new subjects (paragraph 29).
- (viii) Each time a historian is needed to write an official history, the post should be openly, if inexpensively, advertised and the appointment should be made by a panel which would interview a short list of candidates and include at least two scholars of eminence nominated by the British Academy (paragraph 31).

- (ix) The British Academy should be invited to play a key role in running the programme both to enhance its credibility and to use their expertise to make it still more effective. (paragraph 33).
- (x) A literary agent should be engaged to give advice and to negotiate with publishers (paragraph 36).
- (xi) Historians should be encouraged to raise the profile of their work and thus the programme more generally by publishing articles and delivering conference papers during the course of researching and writing the book or after it has been completed, whichever is best in the circumstances (paragraph 40).
- (xii) At the beginning of each project the historians and the relevant officials should give some careful thought to the eventual outputs (paragraph 41).
- (xiii) Much more effort should be made to take advantage of the programme to help current senior civil servants in their work (paragraph 42).
- (xiv) A department or agency wishing to commission a history of itself or of a subject in which it has an almost exclusive interest should be able to 'contract out' the work on the history to the Cabinet Office programme (paragraph 47).
- (xv) The programme should also extend to include histories on subjects that are considered worthwhile by historians willing and able to meet the programme's expectations although the funding comes from other sources such as a research council or a charitable trust (paragraph 48).

## **THE REVIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT'S OFFICIAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

### **TERMS OF REFERENCE**

To review the Government's Official History Programme covering specifically

- whether it should continue
- whether it should be run from the Cabinet Office or by, for example, the National Archives or Ministry of Justice
- whether responsibility for the work should be more widely dispersed amongst interested Departments with a reduced burden on the lead organisation
- whether the present oversight arrangements for the programme as a whole and for individual histories, should be continued or changed.

If it is recommended that the programme should continue, to consider, without jeopardising the professional status of the programme or the confidence placed in it by the security community,

- how new subjects for histories should be proposed taking account of interests outside government amongst specialists and the general public, and how decisions should be reached about what should be commissioned
- how people should be chosen to research and write the histories
- whether there is scope for some or all histories to be sponsored jointly with organisations outside government
- whether the programme could be run more cheaply, at no cost or profitably
- what more could be done to increase the value of the programme and improve accessibility to the output for policy makers, academics and the wider public, taking account of current and future technologies as well as other considerations.

To consider further

- the impact, if any, of the programme on FOI requests
- the impact, if any, on the programme of a change in the 30 year rule
- how to establish closer and more effective links between the



programme and individual departmental histories.

To submit a report in April 2009 which could subsequently be made available to all interested parties.

List of witnesses

Professor Richard J Aldrich, University of Warwick  
Alex Allan, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee & Professional Head of Intelligence Assessment, Cabinet Office  
Professor Christopher Andrew PhD FRHistS, University of Cambridge  
\* The Lord Armstrong of Iminster GCB CVO  
Ian Beesley, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Gill Bennett OBE, Former Cabinet Office Official Historian  
[Name redacted], Asst Director for Information Services, Department for Business, Enterprise & Regulatory Reform  
The Rt Hon the Lord Butler of Brockwell KG GCB CVO  
Professor Sir David Cannadine, lately Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother Professor of British History at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London  
Natalie Ceeney, Chief Executive, The National Archives & Keeper of the Public Records  
The Rt Hon Sir John Chilcot GCB, Chairman, Centre for Contemporary British History  
Alexis Cleveland CB, Director General, Transformational Government & Cabinet Office Management, Cabinet Office  
Seb Cox, Head of RAF Historical Branch, Ministry of Defence  
\* Belinda Crowe, Information Director, Ministry of Justice  
Professor David M Downes, London School of Economics, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Tim Dowse, Cabinet Office  
Bob Evans, Ministry of Defence  
Jonathan Evans, Director General, Security Service  
Sally Falk, Deputy Head of Official Histories Team, Cabinet Office  
[Name redacted], Corporate Knowledge Technical Director, Government Communications Headquarters  
Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman KCMG CBE Dphil FBA, Professor of War Studies and Vice Principal, King's College, London. Former Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Alan Glennie, Deputy Departmental Records Officer, Cabinet Office  
Dr Michael Goodman, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Robert Gordon CB, Director-General of Justice, & Head of Legal and Parliamentary Services, Scottish Government  
Professor Terry Gourvish, Director of the Business History Unit, London School of Economics. Former Cabinet Office Official Historian  
[Name redacted], Welsh Assembly Government  
Bill Hamilton, Literary Agent, A M Heath & Co Ltd  
The Rt Hon the Lord Healey of Riddlesden CH MBE  
Professor Peter Hennessy FBA FRHistS AcSS, Queen Mary, University of London  
Professor Sir Michael Howard OM CH Kt CBE MC DLitt FRHistS, University of Oxford  
The Rt Hon the Lord Howe of Aberavon CH QC

\* Robin Jackson PhD, Chief Executive & Secretary, British Academy  
Professor Keith Jeffery, SIS Historian, Queen's University, Belfast  
Sir Bill Jeffrey KCB, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence  
Professor Matthew Jones, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Professor Alexander G Kemp, University of Aberdeen Business School,  
Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Jane Knight, Researcher to Dr Michael Goodman, Cabinet Office  
[Name redacted], HM Treasury  
[Name redacted], Ministry of Defence  
Dr Malcolm Llewellyn-Jones, Historian - Naval Branch, Ministry of Defence  
\* Iain Lobban, Director, Government Communications Headquarters  
Professor Rodney Lowe, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
[Name redacted], Ministry of Defence  
Dame Gillian Morgan DBE FRCP FFPH, Permanent Secretary, Welsh  
Assembly Government  
Tim Newburn, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Sir Gus O'Donnell KCB, Secretary to the Cabinet & Head of the Home Civil  
Service, Cabinet Office  
Christopher Page, Historian, Ministry of Defence  
Professor David Parker, Cranfield School of Management, Cabinet Office  
Official Historian  
Jock Phillips, Former Chief Historian, History Group, Ministry for Culture &  
Heritage, New Zealand  
Sir Jonathan Phillips KCB, Permanent Secretary, Northern Ireland Office  
Karen Pile, CIO Director, Information Strategy & Services, Department for  
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Jacqueline Rees, HM Treasury  
\* Sir Peter Ricketts KCMG, Permanent Secretary & Head of the Diplomatic  
Service, Foreign & Commonwealth Office  
Professor Paul Rock FBA, London School of Economics, Cabinet Office  
Official Historian  
The Rt Hon the Lord Rodgers of Quarry Bank  
Patrick Salmon, Historian, Foreign & Commonwealth Office  
Sir John Scarlett KCMG OBE, Chief, Secret Intelligence Service  
Mark Seaman, Historian, Cabinet Office  
Roger Smethurst, Head of Knowledge and Information Management, Cabinet  
Office  
David Smith, Chief Knowledge Officer, Department for Communities and  
Local Government  
Caroline Smith, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs  
Dr David Stafford, University of Edinburgh, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Tessa Stirling, Head of Official Histories Team, Cabinet Office  
Andrew Stott, Deputy Government Chief Information Officer and Director  
Service Transformation, Cabinet Office  
Hugh Taylor CB, Permanent Secretary, Department of Health  
Miles Taylor, Institute of Historical Research  
David Thomas, Director of Technology and Chief Information Officer, The  
National Archives  
[Name redacted], Home Office  
The Lord Turnbull of Enfield KCB CVO

[Name redacted], Foreign & Commonwealth Office  
Sir Stephen Wall GCMG LVO, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
Rear Admiral Nicholas J Wilkinson CB, Cabinet Office Official Historian  
The Lord Wilson of Dinton GCB  
\* Professor John Young PhD FRHistS, University of Nottingham, British  
International History Group  
\* Provided written evidence. Others provided oral evidence. Robin Jackson,  
for the British Academy, provided both.

## **The UK Government's Official History Programme**

### **Most Recent Official Histories/SOE Histories published in the Post-war series**

SOE in the Low Countries  
(Professor M. R. D. Foot, 2000/2001);

UK Accession to the European Communities (Volume 1)  
(Professor Alan S Milward, 2002);

Secret Flotillas - (revised edition) Volume 1 - Clandestine Sea Operations to Brittany 1940-44  
(Brooks Richards, 2004);

Secret Flotillas - (revised edition) Volume 2 - Clandestine Sea Operations in the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Adriatic 1940-44  
(Brooks Richards, 2004);

SOE in France (revised edition)  
(Professor M. R. D. Foot, 2004);

The Falkland's Campaign (Volumes 1 and 2)  
(Professor Lawrence Freedman, Hardback 2005, Paperback 2007);

The Channel Tunnel  
(Dr Terry Gourvish, 2006);

Churchill's Man of Mystery: Desmond Morton and the World of Intelligence  
(Gill Bennett, 2006);

The Official History of Privatisation (Volume 1)  
(Professor David Parker, 2009)

### **Official Histories/SOE Histories in the course of preparation**

Development of North Sea Oil and Gas  
(Professor Alex Kemp);

UK Accession to the European Communities (Volumes 2 )  
(Sir Stephen Wall);

The Civil Service since Fulton  
(Professor Rodney Lowe);

Privatisation (Volume 2)  
(Professor David Parker)

D-Notice System  
(Rear Admiral Nick Wilkinson)

Cabinet Secretaries  
(Ian Beesley)

Joint Intelligence Committee  
(Dr Michael Goodman)

Chevaline  
(Professor Matthew Jones)

Criminal Justice System. (should start April 2009)  
(Professor David Downes, Professor Tim Newburn and Professor Paul Rock)

External Economic Policy since the War (Volume 2)  
(Professor L S Pressnell);

From Defence by Committee to Defence by Ministry  
The Development of the Central Organisation of Defence in the United  
Kingdom  
1902-1964  
(Professor Donald Cameron Watt).

SOE in Italy - Christopher Woods (Volume 1), Professor David Stafford  
(Volume 2)

SOE in Greece - Professor Richard Clogg

### **[Other Official Histories/SOE Histories published in the Post-war series](#)**

Health Services since the War (Volume 2)  
(Dr Charles Webster, 1996);

British Part in the Korean War (Volume 2)  
(General Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley, 1995)

British Part in the Korean War (Volume 1)  
(General Sir Anthony Farrar-Hockley, 1990);

Health Services since the War (Volume 1)  
(Dr Charles Webster, 1988);

External Economic Policy since the War (2 volumes)  
(Professor L S Pressnell, Volume 1 1987);

Colonial Development (5 Volumes)  
(D J Morgan, 1980);

Environmental Planning (4 Volumes)  
(Professor J B Cullingworth & G F Cherry, 1975-81);

Nationalisation of British Industry (1 Volume)  
(Sir Norman Chester, 1975).

Secret Flotillas - Clandestine sea lines to France and French North Africa  
1940-44  
(Brooks Richards, 1996);

SOE in Scandinavia  
(Dr Charles Cruickshank, 1986);

SOE in the Far East  
(Dr Charles Cruickshank, 1983);

**[Official Histories From 2000 List Deferred until Future programme](#)**

Devolution

Policy towards the Former Yugoslavia

# **Review of the publishing arrangements under the Government's Official History Programme.**

## **Introduction**

1 This review of the Publishing side of the Official History Programme was commissioned by Roger Smethurst and Tessa Stirling in December 08. It was commissioned to complement the more fundamental review of the Programme being conducted by Joe Pilling which has now also been completed.

2 The terms of reference of the publishing review<sup>1</sup> cover the selection of topics, the manner and form of publication, the production, marketing and sales of individual volumes and the series, the commercial arrangement with publishers; with the aim of finding ways of enhancing the readership for the Programme and increasing public awareness of the operations of government.

3 My experience comes from outside government and the academic world. I have been a literary agent for 25 years representing, amongst others, academic historians writing for the general market. I was chosen by MI5 by public tender to represent their Authorised History of MI5, written by Christopher Andrew (who was a longstanding client) and subsequently also the Authorised History of MI6 being written by Keith Jeffery. Both these volumes lie outside the Official History Series but share some elements in common with them: they are major research histories written from unreleased files. Both books secured extremely large publishing contracts in both the UK and the US, on the basis of extensive proposals.

4 I was given very friendly assistance by the Cabinet Office team including Tessa Stirling, Roger Smethurst and many of the official historians. I consulted publishers, other historians, literary editors and members of the Whitehall History Project who gave me invaluable insight into their respective historical programmes.

## **1 The Histories and Cabinet Office**

1.1 The Official Histories are a rare and prestigious opportunity for historians to spend a long period at the peak of an academic career on a research project working on exclusive source material, including access to major public figures. They are one of relatively very few such sources of funding, alongside for example a Leverhulme or ESRC grant, that permits historians to practise uninterruptedly their original training of pure research. Historians have seized the opportunity with relish: unreleased government records are a goldmine of primary documents that reveal an enormous amount about the process of government.

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<sup>1</sup> The Terms of Reference are at Annex A



1.2 Cabinet Office is described by the official historians unanimously as an excellent working environment run by extremely helpful people: they all made a point of singling out Tessa Stirling for her unstinting support, together with her team providing endless help and mediating with government departments. The convenience of Cabinet Office as a centre for intensive research cannot be overstated. It is a place where the historians can meet and share notes and foster each other's work, replicating the social and intellectual ethos of their university departments. It is close to both the archives and the people who are the primary source material for the histories. The long experience of the staff there is invaluable.

1.3 Cabinet Office has a necessary role in the difficult process of clearances. Historians can feel entirely on their own when struggling to reconcile their professional independence of judgement with the sometimes arcane restrictions Whitehall might seek to impose on them. Only Cabinet Office has the weight to mediate on their behalf.

1.4 The purpose of the official histories is to get a comprehensive and authoritative account out into the public domain; yet departments have sometimes chosen to define this in a way which is narrower than historians recognise as academically credible. Cabinet Office is a necessary guarantor of the independence of the historian who might otherwise be under pressure from any individual department to provide a narrative especially favourable to itself. I can't think of any other government agency which could provide this protection.

## **2 The Historians**

2.1 The official historians have been chosen by a variety of different methods, some more transparent than others. At one end of the spectrum there is a public tendering process in which a number of historians are invited to apply; at the other there has been private discussion leading to a single candidate being asked to put a proposal together. In terms of accountability it would be easy to improve this system, though the eventual choice of historian would often be identical whichever way it was done. It is hard to think of any other historian as well qualified to write the Channel Tunnel book as Terry Gourvish, for instance, or anyone better qualified than Sir Lawrence Freedman to write the Falklands War history, though in both cases a public tendering process of some kind was indeed followed.

2.2 Public tendering in itself is not necessarily enough. An advertisement in Times Higher Education Supplement is not necessarily going to come to the attention of the historian of choice for Cabinet Office. (It was only by accident, for instance, that Christopher Andrew was alerted to an advertisement for the History of MI5.) Just as in academe strong candidates are asked to apply for publicly advertised jobs, so the Official Histories management can make a judgement of the people they would like to see coming forward, and tip them off that they would be welcomed as candidates.

2.3 Joe Pilling is suggesting a new framework which will help advertise the forthcoming histories more effectively, and trawl more widely in academe for candidates. I would like to suggest that this includes a clear instruction about the kind of book that is required. I explore this at greater length below.

2.4 If the proposals for publishing recommended in this review are accepted for future Histories it will require strict adherence to deadlines and delivery of a text. In the last ten years or so contracts have been introduced for each History and most have Project Boards and these endeavour to keep the individual histories to deadline although on some occasions, no doubt for good reasons, Boards themselves have agreed to deadline extensions. Tighter criteria and a strong commitment to meeting delivery dates will be important. There are also a very few remaining histories commissioned many years ago which have not been published largely because without contracts and Project Boards the Cabinet Office has no leverage over them. In general publishing a publisher reserves the right to demand the repayment of an advance for an undelivered book. The situation for the Official Histories is not analogous, but given the scale of funding supplied by Cabinet Office it would be legitimate to demand a complete book within a reasonable period. If the histories were to be sold separately there would inevitably be a delivery provision as part of each contract.

2.5 Some historians have proved too old to complete their histories. Historians at the peak of their careers may not always be the right candidates for such long demanding research as the Official Histories demand. There is a good argument that some significantly younger candidates of proven quality but high profile should be included in the mix as a matter of policy. It would raise the profile of the series if some media-savvy historians were seen to be attached to the Official Histories, and were making their reputations through it.

2.6 The usual financial model employed by Cabinet Office is to buy out the historians' University time for as long as they need. It is generally expected to be an extensive period, and it can prove to be elastic, especially if one volume extends into 2 or more volumes. I have no opinion on whether this financial aspect needs to be made more transparent, except that it needs to be more openly addressed in the tender document. Different historians are paid at different rates and that must surely remain a private matter.

### **3 Historians and their Readers**

3.1. The first question one historian asked the board considering his candidacy was, 'Who is your reader?' (He is both an academic historian and writes his books for the general reader through a general publisher.) He would have welcomed more clarification from his Project Board on this issue. The default position for academic historians writing from primary sources coincides with the definition of this programme as 'providing a reliable secondary source for historians until all the records are available in the National Archives'. This is a very narrow definition of the possible readership for the series.

3.2 But many historians write differently for different audiences, on a spectrum from research papers to Higher (or even lower) journalism. The possible readership for any non-fiction book is determined by the topic but also by the style of writing, and most historians are used to being adaptable. The language of lecturing is usually a lot less formal than research papers.

3.3 Oxford University Press commented to me that higher journalism 'can be livelier than an official history and in its essentials well informed', meaning it can be both a pleasure to read and academically sound. The histories that general publishers (and academic publishers too) can sell in significant numbers have to be on topics that are self-evidently popular in subject-matter, or written as higher journalism, or both. It is pretty obvious that there are very few readers outside academe who read research-driven history.

3.4 From my point of view, as someone in general publishing, this is the central issue in this report. The management of the Official Histories needs to take a view, topic by topic, on what readership it wants, whether for civil servants, academe, or the general public or a mixture of all three. This is an important decision that has to be made at the start of the commissioning of individual histories: whether to aim for readers, or to have them published for reference purposes. The latter seems to be the default position, yet it is incompatible with other aims of the programme to communicate and educate.

## **4 Criteria for selecting Official Histories**

4.1 The published criteria for topics – books of public interest whose primary documentary sources have not yet been released to The National Archive, and whose subject matter extends across departments - are a useful Whitehall shorthand but not a particularly useful description of a publishing programme. The SOE books and Gill Bennet's biography of Desmond Morton are included in the series and called Official only because they are a forum for releasing material held in an otherwise wholly closed archive. Unlike the rest of the histories the period they cover is all pre-1945. There is only one biography in the list. The extent to which the history of Britain and the European Community 1962-1970 is based on archives that are still closed is not clear at first sight, since the 30-year rule extends back only as far as 1979. In any case the 30-year rule seems to be applied according to slightly inconsistent criteria, partly because some departments don't have the manpower to do the releases. And SIS remains outside it with the exception of its own authorised history and an increasing volume of material put up on its website.

4.2 There is actually a reasonably wide spectrum of reasons why these books are commissioned as official histories, and why any classified or retained material is released in book form or otherwise. As these reflect various loose ends around Whitehall the logic behind them remains opaque to the outside world. It is equally mysterious to the outside world why obvious topics which are not cross-departmental, might not even contain much unreleased material, but which could be of outstanding interest to the public, have not been commissioned.

4.3 The criteria are short of guidance on other aspects too, such as the optimal length of these books, or the time frame they should cover, or the public accountability that they should satisfy. They provide no positive guidelines about the kind of books which are needed to provide lessons for Government, fill gaps in historical knowledge, or might have public appeal. A clearer application of all of these factors would make it much easier for publishers to understand the programme, and should help choosing future topics.

4.4 What has become clear to me is that the books are actually commissioned for very different reasons by different departments and with different kinds of readership in mind, but without these elements being interrogated or advertised very clearly. From a publishing point of view the purpose and readership of a book are always the first questions to ask. The danger in the current arrangement is that the writing of the history is currently the end in itself, which seems to me to be circular.

## **5 General Criticisms of the Publishing of the Programme**

5.1 Lord Rodgers commented in a House of Lords debate in February 2008 that the publishing of the books was poor. The books were very expensive (at an average of £55), the production was indifferent, the marketing almost non-existent. It seems that these comments were one of the things that set this review going.

5.2 Some Official Historians have found that from the start the publisher was sceptical about their topic (in the worst cases they told the historian when they were first in touch that the books wouldn't sell). There was very little editorial engagement with the text, and the historians were left to organise all their own publicity as the publisher did nothing to arrange lectures or events or national media coverage.

5.3 The publishers I approached commented that most of the topics on the current list were not commercially attractive in their current as they stood – they wouldn't have bid significant money for them - and that the whole publishing programme extending to material from the WHP and SOE histories was confusing.

5.4 Some historians outside the Programme have commented that because many titles were written so intensively from their primary sources they were boring to read; almost everyone agreed that the programme did not include many obvious subjects of great public interest; a few have pointed out that the brief of writing almost exclusively from the unreleased British sources, and not extending the research to foreign files giving the mirror image of the same events, limited their range unnecessarily. It does seem to me as a non-specialist that this limitation must restrict both the inherent interest of the books and the lessons that government could learn from them.

5.5 The very modest return of royalty income from these books against the considerable financial investment in their writing is plainly of concern to Cabinet Office, perhaps alerted to the possibility of making more money out of them by the sales of the histories of MI5 and MI6, which were very lucrative. At the very least there is no way under the present arrangement of finding what the commercial value of individual volumes would be.

5.6 The Programme has a low profile except in Whitehall and among some historians. None of the publishers or literary editors that I talked to – and few historians - were conscious of the series or what it consisted of. There is plainly a lot of work to do before the histories get the public recognition they deserve, or before the historians and Cabinet Office get a return on their investment of time and money. Whether or not individual volumes are intended to be accessible to a popular audience, they represent high level history written by high quality historians from privileged sources, and give a rare insight into aspects of government. Currently there is very little public recognition of these unique qualities.

## **6 The current Publishing Contract**

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## **7 Publishing options**

7.1 It is obvious from my discussions that publishers are only interested in selecting or bidding for individual titles they think they can sell, and which ideally they have some active role in commissioning. They would prefer to evaluate the commercial appeal of each book according to its merits, and would expect to offer the standard publishing contract of an advance set against royalties in any tendering process. Each book should plainly be subject to a separate sale, which would be transparent and accountable, and achieve whatever commercial value each volume had. The standard means to do so worldwide is through a literary agent.

7.2 Publishers are used to buying non-fiction at proposal stage, partly so they can ensure a book is fulfilling its brief in the course of the writing. If the clearance process for a particular topic made that problematic, the sale could also happen when the book was finished and cleared. Where publishers do buy a book at proposal stage they would expect to have some relationship with the author during the writing even if they couldn't see the text until it was cleared. This issue has been successfully resolved with the MI5 book, in the sense that the editor has been kept abreast of progress and brought in at the earliest editorial stage that was consistent with the clearance process, in a secure environment.

7.3

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7.4

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7.5 A similar range of up to date publishing techniques are to be found in the broad FCO publishing programme, which uses electronic download, CD-Rom, microfilm, print on demand (until recently done internally rather than via a commercial organisation), small print run and mainstream publication of, for example, the Documents on British Policy Overseas, via the WHP contract. It publishes research papers covering topics that go back almost 100 years (The Zinoviev Letter), provides downloadable essays on topics such as Nazi Gold, and shows a clear appreciation of the different layers of public interest in history and government from the academic to the popular. There is a noticeable appetite for communicating to the general public using original research.

7.6 There are therefore two directions in which the publishing of the Programme can improve its performance. One is to segregate individual titles for separate sales to publishers, and the other is to use the different means of publication [Commercially sensitive content removed]

## **8. Selling Book by Book**

8.1 My experience shows that topics at the highest level of public interest, written accessibly by the best available writers – for example the histories of MI5 and MI6 – publishers will pay very large sums of money, aiming to reach a wide audience with well produced books published at a reasonable price. Authors such as Peter Hennessy have been writing about Whitehall with notable commercial and critical success. Even though the market for history is much more subdued now than it was 10 or even 5 years ago, there is strong public interest in the right topics written for the general reader.

8.2 If publishers were allowed to cherry-pick the high profile titles, what would happen to the rest? There are two answers.

8.3 First, there are plenty of academic publishers who would publish any work of academic excellence alongside all the other works they publish specifically for the academic or reference market.

8.4 Secondly, if any of these titles are not accepted for publication even by a mainstream academic publisher (which is highly unlikely), then by definition Cabinet Office needs to find its own means of publication, whether print on demand or electronic. These days access to these means of distribution is straightforward, and relatively cheap. [Commercially sensitive content removed] Other departments like the MOD have extensive websites.

8.5

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8.6 Print on demand in particular is being adopted widely as a convenient means of supplying small quantities of books over an indefinite period of time at low cost. The major publishing groups are all adopting it. If Cabinet Office

needed to go this route, they would need to subcontract the editing and designing of the texts, which raises the issues of security clearance and cost. Freelance editors and book designers are not expensive and in the present downturn there are many available. An advertisement in The Bookseller magazine is all that's necessary.

8.7 I do not think that distributing the Official Histories amongst various publishers will damage the Programme or individual titles, given that the series is barely marketed as a series, and that the cost of keeping it together is a poor return and necessarily leads to unsatisfactory publishing. The fact that some of the SOE histories are published outside the Routledge contract is almost unnoticed, and does no harm even to the SOE part of the history programme. The only way the series would have added value as a series would be if the books had substantially similar readership, scope and commercial appeal.

## **9 Choosing Topics**

9.1 To an outsider one of the most mysterious aspects of the Programme is the process by which topics are invited, proposed, filtered and approved, leading via Privy Counsellors all the way up to the Prime Minister. As far as I can tell, at no stage is there any mechanism for taking soundings from publishing about whether a topic is of public interest, assessing what its readership is, or what it might be worth commercially.

9.2 Different departments have very different ideas of what is of interest, and to whom. Some have no in-house historians, and according to some historians some departments have almost no historical memory due to changes in personnel. What is suggested back to Cabinet Office will reflect the different layers of engagement that individual departments have with their histories. It is bound to be very patchy unless Cabinet Office, or a new management board acting for it, takes positive steps to identify histories that it considers ought to be written, and asks the respective departments for them.

9.3 General publishing of serious history is about tailoring the most interesting framework or historical timescale for a topic with the most interesting available historian so as to reach the widest possible readership. It is a collaborative process starting with the topic or the historian. This is not the way the official histories are currently chosen, which appears to have no formal process for adapting a topic to the market or tailoring it with a chosen author at the start of the process. There are important practises here from general publishing that could be adopted. It is clear that many of the historians in the programme do over time adapt their original brief to suit their purposes, sometimes extending the period covered, or dispensing with conclusions occasionally provided (prematurely) as part of their brief.

9.4 There are limitations in general history publishing. Even academic publishers can hardly sell 2-volume or multi-book projects in significant numbers at all: [Commercially sensitive content removed] The general reader is interested in one volume which covers an important subject broadly and

definitively. If one pursued a wide readership too rigorously this would cut across a number of long-term multi-volume official histories. The obvious solution, which has been used on occasion, is that when the multi-volume version has been completed, a single volume version can be carved out of it, either by the existing historian or by someone else.

## **10 Choosing Topics (2)**

10.1 If the Cabinet Office wants the official histories to communicate better with the public and make money, it needs to address the issue of the neglect of very senior management over many years. Joe Pilling has suggested a new overarching senior governance structure. I agree with this recommendation and believe it should include historians, journalists (Andrew Marr for example) and experts from publishing, to advise on topics and give advance estimates of their potential readership, and to help with publicly accountable and transparent systems for choosing new historians.

10.2 This management structure needs some means of evaluating the benefits to Cabinet Office, to Whitehall, and to the taxpayer, of the different kinds of publication that will ensue from different kinds of topic. Some topics could be commissioned explicitly for reference and others for a wider readership, without sacrificing quality. Joe Pilling has made specific suggestions about this structure, which is beyond my brief.

10.3 The topics the public are likely to be most interested in may involve the most clearance difficulties. If there is supposed to be an element of public accountability in the Official Histories series then this an issue which needs facing head on. Some departments most in the firing line over clearances will have strong inhibitions about certain topics. When two Intelligence Services and the JIC have all commissioned volumes there are powerful precedents for overcoming these inhibitions.

## **11 Future Topics**

Publishers and historians have suggested various topics for future histories, in the course of my conversations. These are the ones which are their front runners.

The most obvious gaps are military, topics which have for obvious reasons already been extensively covered in the media and by other books:

First Gulf War,  
Former Yugoslavia,  
Afghanistan

Other topics of major public interest are:

Nuclear Power  
Nuclear Deterrence (partly covered by the Chevaline volume)  
Immigration



The Special Relationship  
Horizon Scanning/Contingency Planning  
Crisis Management  
Education  
The Special Branches  
Industrial Policy  
Budget Making  
Decolonisation  
Northern Ireland

In all cases the publishers were interested in one volume covering an extended period, usually 1945 to the present.

## **12 Future Topics: MOD suggestions.**

12.1 The Ministry of Defence is keen to extend its list of recommended titles for the series to include both matters of current public interest and to fill in gaps in the past, which under the current criteria would not be included: campaign histories that never got written in an official manner, such as the Malay Insurgency or the Kenya Emergency.

12.2 The list of topics suggested by the MOD in the last round also includes:

The UK's contribution to the Defence of Western Europe 1945-1990  
The History of Science and Technology in the MOD since 1918  
UN Operations and UK involvement 1945-1995.

With lively historians these would be of interest to the general public.

12.3 The Official Histories started with the need for definitive campaign histories, specifically the Boer War, and since military history is a lively and successful part of trade publishing and in a practical sense will always provide clear lessons for the present, I support the extension of the Programme to fill in historic gaps such as those in 12.1 as a publishing proposition. It would not undermine the reputation or the purpose of the Programme, and would be a simple way of extending the readership. Clearance problems should be relatively minor.

12.4 MOD also pointed out that the Cabinet Office was one of the few umbrella organisations capable of bringing together the rival or competing perspectives of the 3 Services in a unified narrative. Currently the Naval and Air historical branches publish for their services only. The Army is fully engaged in other kinds of publishing. There is a lot of publishing of various kinds which gives a single perspective on a campaign or an issue. More use should be made of the opportunity to exploit the MOD's publishing relationship with the Cabinet Office and the FCO in a way that is analogous to Cabinet Office bringing together different departments for the histories.

## **13 Cost and benefit of the Histories**

13.1 The Official Histories are expensive to commission. They produce very high quality history. From a practical point of view it is not clear to me how much use is made of it.

13.2 If a central purpose of the Histories is that they should provide lessons learned to practitioners within Whitehall and beyond, the written volume on its own is unlikely to deliver this requirement. As some historians have pointed out the Civil Servants or politicians most likely to get the most benefit from the Histories will have the least time to read such a long and detailed text: they are too busy preparing for the next meeting. Sir Stephen Wall confirmed this from his personal experience in the FCO. What actually happens is that the historian of The Channel Tunnel, for example, will occasionally get a call from a civil servant asking how a particular breakdown or disaster on Eurostar might be traceable to decisions on the original design, and be given the answer and referred to the relevant pages.

13.3 This suggests that the value of the histories lies as much in the depth of knowledge accumulated by the historian as in the book itself. In order for this expertise to be used fully throughout government, logically the text of the books should be available online in a fully searchable format for any civil servant who might benefit from it. Likewise there would be clear benefit were the historian to remain available to the appropriate departments covered by their book after publication as an outside consultant on a formal if arm's length basis. Given the scale of investment by Cabinet Office in the writing of the histories, this seems a reasonable quid pro quo, and a clear benefit to government. The historians do become more knowledgeable about aspects of Whitehall than any practitioners permanently working in it. This may seem self-evident but it is a significant point.

13.4 The lessons learned from the Histories would become more accessible throughout Whitehall if part of the brief to historians was to provide on delivery of the text a short digest of the book and its conclusions with clear references to the relevant parts of the text for ease of research.

13.5 A further purpose of the Histories is to provide an accurate and vivid account of how Government actually works to the general public. It is a common complaint in Whitehall that the media take terrible liberties with the complexity and sophistication of the decision-making process in order to deliver a good story. The programme would be a more powerful means of counteracting the myths the media propagate if some of the histories were written explicitly with the educated non-specialist reader as a target audience. It is this audience that many of the publishers approached for this survey, even dedicated academic ones [Commercially sensitive content removed] wish to reach. I think the histories need to open up much more in order to bridge the gap between the world class research they contain and the public which is paying for them.

13.6 The series could extract further value via abridged versions or derivative volumes as suggested above in 9.4. Once the original research has been published it is possible to select and reduce and if necessary rewrite at

shorter length for a wider audience. A case in point would be the histories of SOE. More than one publisher said they would want to boil down the entire series into one large volume. This is an editorial process which a publisher would oversee.

## **14 Widening the publishing commitment.**

14.1 A vital ingredient for successful publishing is ownership. The job of a publisher is to project its view of what any book exclusively offers, who it is for, and why the book does the job. The commitment to a book – the publisher's ownership of it - is reflected in all aspects of the editing, design, production, marketing and publicity. [Commercially sensitive content removed]

14.2 In a new management structure for the histories there would be a new balance between the publisher, the author, Cabinet Office, and via the project Board to relevant departments. Having the publisher represented on Project Boards would give them a greatly enhanced sense of editorial and commercial commitment. The Project Boards themselves, while very supportive of the histories, have tended to concentrate on issues relating to their departments rather than looking outwards. They should get more involved.

14.3 Currently the fact that Official Histories are funded entirely by Cabinet Office has diluted the commitment by departments to the books. Joe Pilling has suggested a new financial model to pay for the histories that would spread the financial commitment between departments and share the income in the same way. I think that would lead inevitably to greater commitment to and ownership of these books by the interested parties in government.

14.4 The Cabinet Office parties are the only guaranteed events to mark publication of each of the histories. [Commercially sensitive content removed] the liaison with the public affairs offices of the departments is not working as productively as it could. Whitehall departments all have media liaison departments and it would support the visibility of the programme if they helped publicise the individual histories that they help generate. There are reputational benefits that are not being explored.

## **15 Conclusions**

15.1 The fundamental review of the Official History Programme by Joe Pilling, to which this publishing review is designed to be complementary, has made extensive recommendations to refresh and renew the Programme. I agree with the findings of the Pilling review in respect of the Programme and its management structure.

15.2

[Commercially sensitive content removed]

15.3 If the publishing proposals outlined in this report are implemented it is possible to envisage the future programme being far more high profile, profitable and for some titles cost neutral.

15.4 The breadth and depth of experience of the history programmes within FCO and MOD should be brought much more closely into a new framework for managing the histories.

15.5 The Programme will only find a wider public by bringing in outside advice from historians and from publishing, and by commissioning books that are more fun to read.

15.6 The purpose and audience for each history and the publication options need examining by the Project Board for each history at the outset and the membership of each Board should include a literary agent or publisher to help address these issues.

15.7 The selection process of historians should be made more accountable and consider factors such as age, media profile and narrative skills as well as expertise in a particular subject area.

15.8 The range of future titles should be widened to reflect issues that are important to the public.

15.9 The publishing value of the histories can only be established singly, not as a programme. There would be no commercial damage to any single volume by doing so.

15.10 In order to establish a true commercial value for each volume a literary agent will be needed.

15.11 Any changes to publishing the Cabinet Office Official Histories, as a result of the recommendations in this report, would need to be agreed with the WHP partners, viz FCO and MOD, as any changes would also affect their own publishing arrangements.

## Annex A

### Terms of reference for publishing review

- the way topics are selected eg should the Publisher have some input into the choice of topics?
- the challenge of new ways of working – electronic in addition to the traditional paper ie Publishing online
- how to generate more public interest in the official histories ie marketing both in the UK and abroad particularly in USA
- how to bring the histories alive and make them relevant?
- the needs and position of the other members of the Whitehall History Publishing Group (WHP) ie FCO and MOD
- the feasibility of finding the best deal for each title as opposed to a general contract to take all titles
- the means by which the funding of the histories could be cost neutral to the government or, indeed, to be profitable so that the proceeds fund other historical works
- whether any new contracts can include the costs of copy editing and indexing
- means by which to improve controls over authors in order to deliver to scope and time.